

Sri Lankan free trade zone employees told to keep working as infections rise

Wimal Perera, Kapila Fernando
16 October 2020

Sri Lankan authorities extended a police curfew in Gampaha district on Thursday as coronavirus infections climbed in the area, meaning that it now encompasses the Katunayake Free Trade Zone (KFTZ). Tens of thousands of workers are employed in the KFTZ.

Last week, the government imposed a curfew and lockdown in many parts of the same district, which is adjacent to Colombo district, after hundreds of workers at the Brandix Fashion Ware factory in Minuwangoda tested positive.

Announcing the district wide curfew on Thursday, Army Commander Shavendra Silva, who is also the head of the National Operation Centre for Prevention of COVID-19 Outbreak (NOCPCO), declared, however, that free trade zone workers should continue working. He instructed them to use their service identity cards as curfew passes. In other words, factory production must not be disrupted, irrespective of the danger of infection from the highly contagious disease.

President Gotabhaya Rajapakse originally imposed a long-delayed lockdown on March 20 and then, in line with the brutal “back-to-work” policies implemented by governments everywhere, ordered the economy to be reopened in late April. He allowed companies to call back the minimum required numbers of workers, thus paving the way for mass retrenchments, in a decision fully backed by the trade unions.

At least 135 KFTZ workers have been infected with COVID-19 since October 9, and four factories, Chiefway Katunayake, Next Manufacturing, Naigai and Okaya Lanka, shut down.

The rising number of infections in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone follows the detection earlier this month of hundreds of cases at the Brandix plant, 12 kilometres away. Over 1,040 workers out of the 1,400 employed at the Brandix facility have tested positive. It is one of the country’s largest apparel companies, employing about

50,000 workers at different factories throughout Sri Lanka.

According to health authorities, there are COVID-19 infections in 21 of the country’s 25 districts. At this stage Vavuniya, Mullaitivu, Trincomalee and Kilinochchi are the only districts that do not have any officially recorded cases.

The total number of reported cases in Sri Lanka currently stands at 5,305, with 13 deaths. These figures are mainly a result of low testing levels. Since mid-February, health authorities have only carried out about 360,000 tests in a country with a population of 22 million.

KFTZ workers spoke this week with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters about the situation they confront.

Workers at Okaya Lanka, a Japanese-owned factory that manufactures transformers, told the WSWs that they face unsafe conditions. On October 8, one worker was infected with COVID-19, five other close associates tested positive and another 20 who travelled with them in the factory bus were sent home to self-quarantine.

One said that she went to work on Monday. At midday management told the employees to stop work and leave the factory, saying they would be called for a PCR test, if necessary.

“We asked whether we would be given leave but management said that the factory will continue to work even though one person is infected,” said another worker. He claimed that management was concealing information about the situation.

Some workers have decided to return to their original homes in distant areas because they face a difficult situation if the entire zone is locked down. Earlier this month four or five workers were sent to the remote Kandakadu quarantine centre after some of them had a fever. The management, however, did not check the other workers at the plant.

The Okaya Lanka plant employed more than 1,000

people before the March lockdown, but management axed hundreds of jobs when it reopened. The workers said that the attendance bonus is not being paid, even though a finger-print attendance machine at the facility is not working properly.

The Smart Shirt Company retrenched about 1,700 employees when the factory reopened, reducing its workforce to 300. Workers are paid just 400 rupees (\$US2.2) per day and can only earn more if they do backbreaking overtime.

The number of workers at the plant was further reduced to 150, following the recent rise of infections at KFTZ. One worker explained: “Although a curfew has been declared we don’t have proper safety here. We’re allowed inside after our body temperatures are tested. We use face masks after washing them with soap... [but] if we do not come to work management will lay us off without compensation.”

Next Manufacturing employed about 2,000 workers. It has been closed down after 11 workers tested COVID-19 positive. One worker now under self-quarantine at home following a PCR test said she worked in risky conditions for a wage of about \$173 per month. She looks after one child and has to keep working to pay loans taken out by her husband. Next Manufacturing employees work from 7 in the morning until 6 in the evening.

Another worker said: “Even after the infections were discovered at the Brandix factory, we were forced to work without proper safety measures. Our factory has been closed now but others are open. Thousands face unsafe conditions and the government’s false claims to be concerned about plight have been dropped.

“The Next Manufacturing factory is owned by a company in England. The lives of workers have been thrown to the wolves in order to protect the profits of the big capitalists,” she said.

Many KFTZ workers are employed by so-called manpower companies. One such worker told the WSWS that he could not find a job. “Now I am confined to home because I can’t go nowhere [because of the curfew] and because there’s no work. There’s no money even for day-to-day meals,” he said.

President Rajapakse did not give any notice or organise serious social support for workers and the poor before announcing a national lockdown on March 20. This meant that in the free trade zones, including KFTZ, thousands of workers were stranded for weeks without any income. They were only allowed to return to their remote villages after social unrest began to erupt.

Many KFTZ workers live in overcrowded boarding houses with minimum facilities. Some of these dormitories have up to 100 workers, and also accommodate pregnant women and mothers with their children. The government authorities have now cynically declared that workers should avoid staying in these facilities because of the danger of being infected.

Instead of providing high quality health facilities to protect workers and the poor, the Rajapakse government and its NOCPCO, in the name of controlling the pandemic, is using military methods.

The *Colombo Telegraph* revealed two such incidents this week. It reported that on October 11, “45 garment factory workers (including 25 women, 1 pregnant woman and 2 children) from Liyanagemulla, Katunayake, were rounded-up by the military, and taken by bus to a makeshift quarantine facility in Kalutara.”

The website also reported that at about 12.30 a.m., 53 workers (including 35 women and 1 child), from Avariwatte (near KFTZ) were woken up and herded into a bus in a similar manner.

One worker told the *Telegraph* that: “The military came in the middle of the night and gave us only 10 minutes to pack our essentials and get onto the bus. The military told us not to delay them, because they had been having sleepless nights and were very tired.

“We have no time to check. We are overworked. I had just received my negative PCR test 2 days ago. I wasn’t even given the chance to tell them this. They didn’t allow anyone to speak! They just herded us into buses and took us away.”

The army also collected other workers from nearby the Katunayake, Seeduwa, Negombo and Amandoluwa areas. They have been taken to a quarantine centre at Kalutara, about 85 kilometres away without food or water, the *Colombo Telegraph* said.

“Once there, they had been given some food, but, it had been uneatable. The facility itself has not been cleaned, toilets were flooded and unsanitary, and they had yet to be seen by any health professional or PHI [public health officer].”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact